

Unravelling the Message of Isaiah

A brief guide to reading Isaiah and understanding the key themes

Clint Sheehan

Although the New Testament plainly states that the Old Testament was ultimately written for the benefit of the church,¹ can lead to salvation in Christ,² and is profitable for spiritual growth,³ the Old Testament is often neglected by Christians. This appears to be mainly due to uncertainty concerning interpretation, particularly with the writings of the prophets which can seem quite puzzling at times. The following is a guide for reading and understanding the message of Isaiah.⁴

Understanding the Prophets: a key

The theology of the Old Testament can be organized around the central concept of kingdom through covenant. God is establishing His kingdom through the medium of His covenant relationship with man. Recognizing this brings great clarity to many otherwise difficult passages, and aids us in getting a handle on the message of the prophets who were primarily used by God to call His people to covenant faithfulness. These calls to faithfulness were grounded in the fact that God will bring about the eternal form of His kingdom through the final fulfillment of all covenants resulting in blessings for the faithful and judgment for the wicked.⁵ Familiarity with the various covenants is prerequisite to fully understanding the prophets.

Space does not permit such a discussion here, however, it should be noted that the message of the prophets is based most heavily upon the covenant renewal of Deuteronomy. They frequently quote, paraphrase, and allude to Deuteronomy. What might initially appear to be a relatively insignificant word or phrase in a prophet's message is often revealed to be loaded with meaning in light of its use in Deuteronomy.⁶

The historical context of Isaiah

¹ 1 Cor. 10:1-11.

² 2 Tim. 3:14-15.

³ 2 Tim. 3:16-17.

⁴ This approach can be applied to any of the prophets.

⁵ This 'carrot and stick' motif is also common in the NT. E.g., Mat. 25:31-46; John 3:36; 14:15-24; Rom. 2:1-13; 11:22; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 10:1-14; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1; 1 Thes. 4:1-8; Heb. 3:12-4:1; 6:1-12; 10:19-39; 12:18-29; 1 Pet. 2:1-11; 4:1-11; 1 John 1:4-10; 2:1-6; 3:1-10; 5:13-21; Rev. 21:1-8; 22:1-21.

⁶ E.g., compare Zeph. 1:13 with Deut. 6:1-11; 28:38-48.

Information on the historical context of the ministry of a prophet can shed light on his message. The opening verse of Isaiah provides us with the list of kings who reigned in Judah during the time of his ministry. This provides insight into the eighth-century BC historical, social, and cultural backdrop of Isaiah's ministry.⁷ Peace, comfort, and prosperity had resulted in spiritual complacency. Peace was replaced with turmoil at the hands of the Assyrians but Judah still did not repent and eventually their unfaithfulness to God would lead to their Babylonian captivity. Through detailing the coming acts of God's judgment and deliverance, Isaiah called the apostates to repent and live faithfully as the covenant people of God. At the same time he offered consolation to the faithful remnant, encouraging their perseverance.

Time and eternity blur together in the prophecies of Isaiah. The immediate context was God's judgment of His people at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians, and His subsequent deliverance of them by His destruction of these oppressors. Often however the language looks through the immediate towards ultimate deliverance and judgment at the realization of the eternal kingdom of God. We err if we miss the immediate historical context, but we also err if we miss the eschatological context.

The structure of Isaiah 1-39

Isaiah can be divided into two main sections.⁸ Section I is chapters 1-39, consisting of seven subsections dealing in large part with the downfall of Assyria. Section II is chapters 40-66, consisting of three subsections dealing in large part with the deliverance from Babylon. Chapter one is a summary prologue of the entire book. It contains a summary of God's complaint against His people (1:2-15, 21-23), a call to repentance (1:16-20), and a promise of the blessing of the faithful and the cursing of the unfaithful (1:24-31). The remainder of Isaiah is a detailed expansion of this prologue.

Chapters 2-6 consist of a series of prophecies based upon the increasingly hard-heartedness of the majority of the people of Judah. They open with a picture of the realized kingdom of God (2:1-4). The balance is a call to steadfast faithfulness motivated by the coming judgment of the unfaithful along with the blessing of the faithful. These themes are intertwined with further glimpses of the realized kingdom.

⁷ Uzziah (Azariah) – 2 Kings 15:1-7, 13; 2 Chr. 26:1-23; 783-742 B.C.

Jotham – 2 Kings 15:32-38; 2 Chr. 27:1-9; 742-735 B.C.

Ahaz – 2 Kings 16:1-20; 2 Chr. 28:1-27; 735-715 B.C.

Hezekiah – 2 Kings 18:1-20; 21; 2 Chr. 29:1-32; 33; 715-686 B.C.

⁸ I have adopted the structural outline of Keil & Delitzsch as presented in their excellent *Commentary on the Old Testament*. This commentary series is a must for any serious evangelical student of the OT.

Chapters 7-12 are the promise of the comfort of Immanuel in the face of the Assyrian oppression. The original promise of Immanuel (7:14) was given directly to Ahaz as a sign of deliverance from the kings of Aram and Samaria (7:1-16). The closely parallel language of 7:16 and 8:4 suggests that this promise of a sign to Ahaz was fulfilled in the birth of Maher-shalal-hash-baz (8:3-4). This is supported by the words of Isaiah in 8:18. As we reach 9:1-7 however, we see that there is much more to the promise of Immanuel than merely the deliverance of Ahaz from Rezin and Pekah. The promise is expanded to the deliverance of all the people of God by a child who would be God Himself (9:6). God would someday become flesh and dwell among us, ruling in justice and righteousness, and bringing everlasting peace to His people (9:7).⁹ He will come to judge with righteousness (11:1-5), culminating in the eternal kingdom of God (11:6-10). Thanks to the New Testament, we know that the fullness of the promise of Immanuel is realized in Jesus Christ.¹⁰ Looking forward to this fulfillment of the promise of Immanuel, these chapters close with a psalm of the redeemed (12:1-8).

The next series of chapters, Chapters 13-23, consist of predictions of both the judgment and salvation of the nations. To Isaiah's original audience, the promise of the destruction of the nations was a promise of their own deliverance in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. What they likely had not anticipated was the coming salvation of the nations resulting in equality with Israel before God (19:19-25). This promised equality before God is realized in Christ.¹¹ God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of a multitude of nations,¹² not just of Israel. In fact the promise to Abraham was given long before there even was a nation of Israel¹³ and applies in Christ to all those who are of faith.¹⁴ Thus the promise of the salvation of the nations in these chapters is as much a fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant as is the promise of the judgment of the nations.

Chapters 24-27 build upon the themes of the previous eleven chapters, prophesying of the salvation of God's people in the context of the final judgment of the world. Chapters 28-33 deal with the judgment and deliverance of Judah. God will bring judgment on Judah because outwardly they go through the motions of serving Him but inwardly they are apostate (29:13-14). God will bring Assyria to oppress Jerusalem (29:1-4) for their rebellion (30:1). Jerusalem will repent (30:18-22) and God will deliver His people by destroying their Assyrian oppressors (31:8-9; 33:1).¹⁵

The next two chapters, Chapters 34-35 predict the final revenge and redemption for the people of God. All of the enemies of God and of His people will be utterly destroyed (34:1-15). Only the faithful, the true people of God will

⁹ Note that 9:7 points to the final fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant.

¹⁰ E.g., Mat. 1:22-23; John 1:1-4, 14.

¹¹ Gal. 3:26-29.

¹² Gen. 17:4.

¹³ E.g., Gal. 3:17.

¹⁴ Gal. 3:6-18.

¹⁵ Evidently this object lesson for Jerusalem did not have a lasting effect; see Mat. 23:1-28.

remain and they will rejoice at the majesty and glory of the Lord (34:2). This promise began to be realized with the coming of Christ Jesus.¹⁶

The final sub-section of the first half of Isaiah, Chapters 36-39, brings the first major section of Isaiah to a close with four historical accounts. The first two address Assyrian times (36-37) while the second two introduce the future entanglement with Babylon (38-39). Here we find the fulfillment of the promised destruction of the Assyrian army with a sword not of man.¹⁷ The warning of the future Babylonian captivity (39:5-8) begins the transition to the second half of Isaiah

The structure of Isaiah 40-66

The second half of Isaiah consists of three major subsections, each made up of nine addresses.¹⁸ The overarching theme is the promise of the coming deliverance tied into a call to repentance. The central theme of Chapters 40-48 is deliverance from the coming Babylonian captivity. The central theme of the next nine chapters, Chapters 49-57, is the atonement for sin made by the self-sacrifice of the Servant of the Lord. The central theme of the final chapters, Chapters 58-66, is the assurance that the glory of eternity far outweighs the present sufferings.¹⁹ Contrast is a prominent feature of this second section of Isaiah. Chapters 40-48 contrast the Lord God and the idols. Chapters 49-57 contrast the present suffering of the Servant of the Lord and His future glory. Chapters 58-66 contrast the hearts of the faithful and the hearts of the unfaithful. The ongoing call to repentance is heightened by the parallelism of the conclusions of each subsection.²⁰

There is material in this second section so Christological that it would be at home in the New Testament, and in fact can only be rightly understood in hindsight through the New Testament. Some of the strongest scriptural arguments for the deity of Christ are found here.²¹ The foretelling of the sacrifice of Christ is so detailed it could rightly appear as an eyewitness account in any of the gospels (52:13-53:12).

No Other God beside Me

After the prologue (1:1-31), Isaiah opens (2:1-4) and closes (66:20-24) his message with pictures of the realized kingdom of God. Bracketed in between are

¹⁶ Compare 35:4-6 with Mat. 11:2-5.

¹⁷ Compare 31:8, 9 with 37:33-38.

¹⁸ The first is chapters 40; 41; 42:1-43:13; 43:14-44:5; 44:6-23; 44:24-45:25; 46; 47; 48.

The second is chapters 49; 50; 51; 52:1-12; 52:13-53:12; 54; 55; 56:1-8; 56:9-57:21.

And the third is chapters 58; 59; 60; 61; 62; 63:1-6; 63:7-64:12; 65; 66.

¹⁹ Paul made the same observation in Rom. 8:18.

²⁰ Compare 48:22, 57:21, and 66:24.

²¹ E.g., compare 43:11 and 45:21-22 with Acts 4:10-12; 45:23 with Phil. 2:9-11; 44:6 with Rev. 22:13; and 44:24 with John 1:1-2 and Col. 1:16.

calls to repentance entwined with promises of judgment and deliverance. There is only one true God and Saviour, beside whom there is no other (45:21). Both in structure and content Isaiah calls us to be faithful to God because the day is approaching when He will ultimately fulfil all covenants resulting in the eternal kingdom of God in glory and righteousness. The inception of the fulfillment of these promises was at the first coming of Christ and the culmination will be at His second coming.

Published in *The Gospel Witness*, December 2005.